



# Celebrating Rosie the Riveter

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## The Rosies: In Their Own Words



In 2000, the Women's Bureau joined the National Park Service to officially open the Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Historic Park in Richmond, California. With its expansive views of the Bay, a commemorative public art sculpture of a ship hull, stack and stern under construction, a visitor center replete with photos, and remembrances and artifacts from life during World War II, it's easy to imagine "Rosie the Riveter," or perhaps more accurately in these shipyards, "Wendy the Welder," assembling the ships that were critical to the war effort.

In 2020, the Department of Labor collectively inducted the nearly 6 million women who served as "Rosie the Riveters" into our Hall of Honor. On March 21, designated Rosie the Riveter Day, we honor the legacy of the women whose work supported the war effort and push for continued equity for women in nontraditional jobs.

This Rosie the Riveter Day, the Women's Bureau has returned to the park to talk with real-life Rosies and modern-day tradeswomen about their work. Their stories are moving, tough and surprisingly similar.

While women workers proved more than capable during the war effort, many also recount stories of gender and racial discrimination and harassment. Betty Reid Soskin, a leading spokesperson for the diverse experiences of domestic war-effort workers during World War II, joined the Park Service in 2004 to ensure that visitors to the historic park learn about the experiences of black women who were fighting to secure a double victory: defeat of fascism abroad and racism at home.

Fighting for equal pay and opportunity laid the groundwork for the ensuing battles to pass the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. President Johnson later issued executive orders that further strengthened employment opportunities and discrimination protections for women and minority workers seeking higher paying jobs in shipyards, factories, building trades and other fields.

Despite the many milestones in equal employment opportunity law and regulation, stereotypes and cultural and structural obstacles continue to divide women and men into different industries and jobs. Nationally, women represent only 12.5% of apprentices and just 3.9% of workers in construction and extraction occupations.

Meg Vasey is the current executive director of Tradeswomen Inc., which is the recipient of one of our Women in Apprenticeship & Nontraditional Occupations grants. Of the critical importance of these and other actions for tradeswomen today, she explained, “an intentional focus on equity makes a real difference in bringing women into the trades and seeing them advance. We’ve joined with the Rosie the Riveter Trust to create a certification award program that guides contractors in the steps needed to build a welcoming climate where women can thrive.” This new certificate award program is yet another tool, along with WANTO and other similar initiatives, in the arsenal of strategies to build opportunity for women.

The Women’s Bureau released a report last week underscoring why this effort is so critical. Working women, especially women of color, were most impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and occupational segregation was key: In 2020, women were overrepresented in occupations and industries that pay some of the lowest wages in the economy and that suffered the greatest job losses during the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, occupational segregation contributed to the gender and racial wage gap, and it has significant costs for women, families and our economy. In 2019 alone, estimates suggest that it cost Black women an estimated \$39.3 billion, and Hispanic women an estimated \$46.7 billion, in lower wages compared with white men.

The pandemic upended our lives in ways too numerous to quantify, but the economic losses experienced by women, especially women of color, couldn’t be clearer.

There is much we can do to rectify this situation and it couldn’t be a better time to build the pipeline for women to enter the building trades. Federal jobs funded through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will increase jobs that pay family sustaining wages, health insurance and pensions. Jobs like this change women’s lives.

The Women’s Bureau is committed to addressing the many factors that contribute to the gender wage gap including tackling occupational segregation. Our WANTO grantees have proven that with the right training and support women are successful in nontraditional fields.

Now we have an opportunity to learn from this moment, remember the great legacy of Rosie the Riveter and build a future that makes a real difference for women’s economic future and the quality of lives for families across this great nation.

*Wendy Chun-Hoon is the director of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau. Follow the agency on Twitter: @WB\_DOL.*

**Tags:** Women's Bureau, Rosie the Riveter, equal pay act, apprenticeship, Women in Apprenticeship and Non-Traditional Occupations program, History

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